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ABSTRACT

School counselors spend much of their time involved in administrative tasks, resulting in an inadequate use of counselors' skills and preventing counselors from meeting the primary needs of students. Changes must be initiated in the educational system to allow counselors to counsel students. The four counselors at Mt. Pleasant Township (Indiana) Community Schools began an effort to coordinate the counseling program by meeting regularly to share ideas and by consulting with principals and superintendents to develop a list of performance goals and a time table. Localized needs assessment instruments were developed to measure the needs of students, faculty and administration, and parents. A guidance advisory council met to identify the needs of students and the role of the school counselor. The next phase of the project will be to share the results of the needs assessment and council session and to develop a written guide for counseling, outlining goals and activities. Counselor roles must change to include accountability, good communications, and futuristic actions; counseling services provided by the school must be in direct response to the needs of the students, parents, staff, and the community; and the counseling profession itself must move from being a peripheral part of the educational program to being a strong, viable link in the entire educational chain. (NB)

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Meeting Students' Needs: Counselors' Changing Roles

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Abstract

This article proposes a process for change regarding counselors' roles in concert with the national reform movement in education. Necessary components for implementation based on the CEEB's "Keeping the Options Open" proposal are discussed.

Meeting Students' Needs: Counselors' Changing Roles

School counselors too often spend a major portion of their time involved in administrative tasks such as maintaining records and supervising students. These duties result in an inadequate use of counselors' special skills and talents and do not allow counselors to meet the primary needs of students (Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling [CPGC, 1986]. It is time for school counselors to stand up and be responsible for what they are trained to do. Appropriate changes must be initiated in the educational system.

It becomes apparent to counselors who are deluged with college and scholarship recommendations, schedule changes, special education forms, and stacks of phone messages to return, that something must change if they are to find adequate time to counsel students. The question then is "Who makes the changes and what changes must be made?"

As we look to the national reform movement in education (Stedman, 1987), we see an emphasis on 'effective schools." According to Stedman, this translates into five factors: (a) strong leadership by the principal, particularly in instructional matters; (b) high expectations for student achievement on the part of teachers; (c) an emphasis on basic skills; (d) an orderly environment; and (e) the frequent, systematic evaluation of students. The "effective schools' movement is designed to bring about an improvement in students' test scores, attendance, and dropout rates. But, is an effective school necessarily a "good" school? At a recent state education convention (Glickman, 1987), a panel of educators who had observed various schools in search of the effective school were asked the question: "How do you know that you are in a good school?" The tone and content of these unrehearsed responses were

dramatically different from those referring to the effective school. The panelists mentioned the smiles on students' faces, the care and concern that teachers showed in talking with students, the excitement with which students engaged in activities, and the openness with which students questioned one another (Glickman, 1987).

Role Definition

A major problem for counselors is the lack of role definition. A possible solution suggested by Hargens (1987) is to specifically define the counseling program, thereby defining the counselor's role. This is simple to verbalize but difficult to initiate. The College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) sponsored a Commission of Precollege Guidance and Counseling (CPGC) to investigate and suggest ways in which this very task might be accomplished. The findings (CPGC, 1986) proposed four priority recommendations for action in the schools: (1) Establish a broad-based process in each local school district for determining the particular guidance and counseling needs of the students within each school and for planning how best to meet these needs. (2) Develop a program under the leadership of each school principal that emphasizes the importance of the guidance counselor as a monitor and promoter of student potential, as well as a coordinator of the school's guidance plan. (3) Mount programs to inform and involve parents and other members of the family who are influential in the choices, plans, decisions, and learning activities of the student. (4) Provide a program of guidance and counseling during the early and middle years of schooling, especially for students who traditionally have not been well served by the schools.

One School's Response

Prompted by the CPGC report, the counselors at Mt. Pleasant Township Community Schools began an effort to coordinate the counseling program in the

school corporation. The four school counselors (one elementary counselor for 900 students, one middle school counselor for 425 students, two high school counselors for 750 students) united services under one title: Counseling Services, Mt. Pleasant Township Community Schools. These coordination efforts included the counselors having regularly scheduled meeting time to synchronize programs, share ideas, and create an atmosphere to allow for catharsis. Stationery and business cards were printed featuring the coordinated concept.

Principals and superintendents were included and consulted on a regular basis. As a result of this administrative input, the counselors developed a list of performance goals and a time table for the school year. This forced counselors to put in writing what they were presently doing, the importance of those activities, and a time frame to carry-out these functions. Having this in mind before receiving input from outside sources allowed them to establish priorities.

Following the recommendations of the College Board's Keeping the Options Open: Recommendations (CPGC, 1986), counselors set out to define the needs of the educational constituents of Mr. Pleasant Township Community. After reviewing several needs assessments from various sources, localized assessment instruments were developed to measure the needs from six separate sources: (a) lower elementary students, (b) upper elementary students, (c) middle school students, (d) high school students, (e) faculty and administration, and (f) parents. Every effort was made to guarantee anonymity. Responses were tabulated by the university computer center, allowing for a thorough analysis of the information.

Lower elementary students were primarily concerned with dealing with physical and sexual abuse, attitudes toward and participation in school, relationships, self-concept, problem-solving/decision making skills, and career information.

The upper elementary students' needs focused upon career information; dealing with drug and alcohol abuse; dealing with physical and sexual abuse; attitudes toward school; relationships; problem-solving and decision-making skills; dealing with peer pressure; self-concept; and dealing with death, divorce, and separation.

Middle school students' concerns revolved around career information; attitude toward school; drug and alcohol education; self-concept; relationships; peer pressure; death, divorce, and separation; physical and sexual abuse information; decision-making, time management, and goal-setting skills; and dealing with anger control.

High school students identified career information; job-seeking skills; relationships; study, test-taking, and note-taking skills; coping with crises; financial aid information; physical and sexual abuse information; decision-making, time-management, and goal-setting skills; planning school course schedules; and drug and alcohol education as areas of primary concern.

Teachers' concerns included individual counseling, group counseling, career information, classroom/course advisement, in-service for teachers on current student concerns (i.e., suicidal tendencies, symptoms of drug or alcohol abuse), and materials to teach self-concept development.

Parents identified concerns in post-secondary training and financial aid, flexibility for scheduling parent conferences, dissemination of information, group counseling for students, and voluntary parent training.

The next step was to form a guidance advisory council. This council included representation from counselors, administration, faculty, parents, students, and community health agencies. The first meeting was a brainstorming session. The role of the school counselor and needs of the students were identified. Each individual was then asked to select and prioritize the top ten interest areas. Areas identified were

self-concept, personal counseling, group counseling, family crisis, counselor availability per building, relationships, problem-solving and decision-making skills, developmental counseling for total student population, communication skills, and parenting skills workshops.

The next phase of the project will be to share the results of the needs assessment and brainstorming session with the advisory council. Discussion of this information by the council will provide direction for the counselors as they begin program development activities. The final product of this effort will be a written guide that outlines goals and activities provided by the corporation's counseling services. The guide will provide direction to the counselors as they carry out their work. It will communicate the goals and priorities of the counseling staff to teachers, administrators, students, and parents.

A written curriculum guide will provide a document by which the counseling services can be implemented, monitored, evaluated, and revised. The ultimate goal of this project is to organize, prioritize, and coordinate counseling services so as to better meet the emerging needs of students.

Counselors' Changing Role

In order to accomplish counseling reform, as supported by Keeping the Options Open: Recommendations (CPGC, 1986), counselors' roles must change to include accountability, good communications, and futuristic actions. Accountability efforts are important to improving services, enhancing professional development, and ensuring the survival of the counseling profession (Fairchild & Zins, 1986). To be accountable, counselors must be proactive in informing the students, staff, administration, and community members of what counselors do and how they do it.

Effective public relations necessitates two-way communication, a give-and-take

exchange between counselors and those with whom they work and whose support they need. Communication is a philosophy -- a perspective in thinking about our work as school counselors. Good communication informs and interprets to the public the objectives, problems, and accomplishments of the school's counseling program. Most of all, it informs parents as to how their children can and do benefit from our counseling services (Rogers & Harvey-DeGarmo, 1982).

A futuristic counseling program should provide activities to help students develop guided images regarding a desirable and preferable future. Counselors should help students develop a positive self-image so that they can look at the future in a positive way. The school counseling program should provide students with as much information as possible regarding post-high school alternatives. This includes counseling the students in a holistic way so that consequences for decisions made by students can be examined. A counseling program needs to help students develop a perception of who they are, perceive an image of the world around them now and in the future, develop an understanding of the relationship between themselves and their world, and achieve the ability to influence these elements (Hays, 1987).

Conclusion

School counseling is one of the most exciting and important professions that an individual can pursue. In a society where rapid change is taking place (i.e., values, morals, the family unit, technology), schools are being called upon to educate students in areas previously assumed by family and community. It is important that counseling services provided by any school be in direct response to the needs of students, parents, staff, and the community which it serves.

Counselors must provide an inviting place to which people feel free to come, including an atmosphere of understanding, caring, and a willingness to take time to be

of help. The counseling profession can no longer be a peripheral part of the educational program. It must be a strong, viable link in the entire educational chain.

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